



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South, 1848-1865

Citation for published version:

Quigley, P 2009, 'Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South, 1848-1865', *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 235-266. <<http://jsh.rice.edu/Content.aspx?id=47>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Southern History

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Quigley, P. (2009). Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South, 1848-1865. *Journal of Southern History*, 75(2), 235-266.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South, 1848–1865

By PAUL QUIGLEY

ALONG WITH THE FOURTH OF JULY IN 1861 CAME A DILEMMA FOR THE members of the '76 Association in Charleston, South Carolina. Formed almost thirty years earlier with the purpose of organizing Independence Day celebrations, the association had faithfully marked every anniversary since then with parades, speeches, and dinners. But in 1861 circumstances were different. The United States were dissolved. South Carolina was part of the newly formed Confederacy. And so the dilemma: should ex-Americans be celebrating American Independence Day at all?

The problem required extensive deliberation. A five-member committee chosen for that task recommended that "the usual celebration of the day . . . by public procession, solemn oration, and political banquet ought to be omitted on the present occasion." The Fourth was too closely associated with the now-defunct Union. And besides, at a time when soldiers from South Carolina and the other southern states had already begun to face off against their northern foe, it did not seem appropriate to hold the customary public revelry. The association as a whole concurred with the committee's recommendation and resolved to bypass the usual festivities, holding only a brief business meeting on the evening of the Fourth.¹

¹ "Report of the Committee," in "Journal of the Whig Association," 1833–1861, #34/306 (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina). The Whig Association was formed in 1833 out of a merger of the Revolutionary Society and the '76 Association; it changed its name in 1839 to the '76 Association. An extra meeting was called on May 29, 1861, to decide whether to celebrate the Fourth of July that year. Having referred the matter to a committee, the association met again on June 17 to hear the committee's recommendation and to make a decision. For their comments on various versions of this essay the author wishes to thank audiences at the 2004 British Association for American Studies annual conference, the Southern Research Circle at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and postgraduate students in the University of Edinburgh's historical methodology course, in addition to William L. Barney, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Enda Delaney, Laura F. Edwards, Barbara F. Hahn, Lloyd S. Kramer, Rosemarie Stremmlau, Harry L. Watson, M. Montgomery Wolf, and the *Journal's* anonymous referees. The contents of this article are drawn from the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "Patchwork Nation: Sources of Confederate Nationalism, 1848–1865" (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006).

MR. QUIGLEY is a lecturer in American history at the University of Edinburgh.

There was more, however, to the committee's report. Even though South Carolinians should not celebrate the Fourth in the traditional fashion, it went on, they should not go so far as to relinquish all claims to the day. After all, as the report's authors saw it, the Fourth of July acquired its significance from its association with those very principles—state sovereignty and the right of self-government by consent—for which South Carolinians were now fighting against the North. To be sure, celebration of the Fourth was rendered problematic by the fact that it had become “the symbol of [the Union's] continuance and the commemoration of its blessings and its power.” South Carolinians should clearly leave this dimension of the holiday behind. Yet the committee remained adamant that they not also abandon their claim “to whatever of historical interest may attach to the day, or any portion of the fame which may belong to it for the constitutional principles there announced.” The ideals of the holiday ought to be clung to even as its institutional associations were left behind.²

The Charlestonians' ambivalence toward the Fourth of July carried with it a set of difficult problems. Would it be possible to detach the ideals of the Fourth from their association with the United States? Could white southerners celebrate the intellectual pillars of American independence without also celebrating its political fruits, or mark the cultural traditions of American nationalism without the institutions of the United States? How did the central role of slavery in the dissolution of the Union and the formation of the Confederacy complicate matters? Was there a place for the Fourth of July in the Civil War-era South?

While students of the Fourth of July have paid some attention to the Civil War-era South, there has been little effort to use the holiday to shed light on the problem of how white southerners navigated the tension between their southernness and their Americanness.³ Historians have done more to address the broader subject of white southerners' efforts to retain aspects of American nationalism, especially the memory of the American Revolution. Yet scholars have generally been unsure

²“Report of the Committee,” in “Journal of the Whig Association.”

³A. V. Huff Jr., “The Eagle and the Vulture: Changing Attitudes Toward Nationalism in Fourth of July Orations Delivered in Charleston, 1778–1860,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 73 (Winter 1974), 10–22; Fletcher M. Green, “Listen to the Eagle Scream: One Hundred Years of the Fourth of July in North Carolina (1776–1876), Part I,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 31 (July 1954), 295–320; Green, “Listen to the Eagle Scream: One Hundred Years of the Fourth of July in North Carolina (1776–1876), Part II,” *ibid.*, 31 (October 1954), 529–49; Joseph Ralph James Jr., “The Transformation of the Fourth of July in South Carolina, 1850 to 1919” (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1987), esp. 26–43. Most accounts portray the story of the Fourth of July in the white South as a declension from nationalism to sectionalism without analyzing the ambivalence and intellectual contexts of this story.

what to make of these efforts. Some have interpreted them as evidence of the essential flimsiness of southern nationalism before and during the Civil War. "It is indicative of the weakness of secessionist ideology in particular, and southern national identity in general," concludes Brian Holden Reid, "that [southerners] were forced to seize the national symbols of the nation-state from which they were seceding."⁴ Others have taken these appropriations more seriously, as indications of white southerners' belief in the essential continuity of their Americanness and their southernness. Thus Drew Gilpin Faust has observed that to southerners themselves, "Secession represented continuity, not discontinuity; the Confederacy was the consummation, not the dissolution, of the American dream." More recently, Anne Sarah Rubin has documented a similar argument—"Rather than representing a challenge to the ideals of the Founding Fathers, the Confederacy would be the perfection of their vision"—with a wealth of examples of Confederates' use of Revolutionary memory and symbols. The white South, according to these historians, presented itself as the rightful heir of the Revolutionary legacy, the bearer of the genuine spirit of American nationalism.⁵

This interpretation has much to recommend it. But, as Charleston's '76 Association's apprehension about the Fourth of July 1861 makes clear, continuity was not the whole story. White southerners approached the Fourth of July—and therefore the memory of the American Revolution, and therefore American nationalism in general—not with unqualified approval but with pensive ambivalence. After all, they were in the process of rejecting the Union, the institutional embodiment of the Revolutionary generation. And their separatism was driven by a commitment to inequality at a time when, as we shall see, the memory of the American Revolution and especially the Declaration of Independence was coming to be defined in terms of the principle of equality. Both of these facts encourage a rethinking of Rubin's

⁴ Brian Holden Reid, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (London, 1996), 267 (quotations); Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 1986), 64–81.

⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 14, 27 (first quotation); Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 14–23 (second quotation on 15). This portion of Rubin's book is drawn from her earlier essay "Seventy-six and Sixty-one: Confederates Remember the American Revolution," in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 85–105. For other discussions of continuities between Confederate and American nationalisms, see George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 46–49, 122–23; Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York, 1991), 175–77; James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York, 1997), 104–6; and Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), esp. 1.

argument that the "Confederates' present revolution was legitimated by the past; they had no doubts the Founders would be with them."⁶ Such a rethinking is supported by a rich body of scholarship on collective memory in various times and places, much of which sees commemoration as an often tentative and contested means of forming national and other group identities.⁷

Focusing on the white South's ambivalent encounter with the Fourth of July provides new perspectives on a problem that has long bedeviled historians and other students of the region: How American is (and was) the American South, and how southern? Responses to this question are often limited by two assumptions: first, that the categories of American and southern are mutually exclusive and, second, that the meaning of each category has been fixed through time. Thanks in no small part to northern victory in the Civil War, the South, and especially the Civil War-era South, has been defined as a region outside the American mainstream. As the historian Carl N. Degler has explained, because the North's version of American nationalism triumphed in the Civil War and became the reality, the North and the nation came to be conflated, with the South relegated to the periphery.⁸ Such perceptions only increased during the civil rights era. White southern resistance to desegregation, displayed in searing images of brutality on the nation's television screens, reinforced the conviction that the South and America, past and present, were polar opposites.

Moving beyond this binary framework enables us to see Civil War-era white southerners' lingering affection for the Fourth of July as part of their attempt to resolve tensions between southernness and Americanness. A number of scholars have encouraged such a reevaluation of the relationship between region and nation. Historians such as Degler and David M. Potter have exposed the distorting effects of equating America with the northern states and of overlooking the roles that southerners played in the creation of the United States and the development of American nationalism.⁹ Others have emphasized the

⁶ Rubin, *Shattered Nation*, 17. Rubin's account, in beginning in 1861, also overlooks the crucial prewar context of southerners' wartime perceptions of the American Revolution.

⁷ See especially Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow*; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989); John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983).

⁸ Carl N. Degler, "Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis: The South, the North, and the Nation," *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (February 1987), 3-18.

⁹ *Ibid.*; David M. Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," *American Historical Review*, 67 (July 1962), 924-50, reprinted in Potter's *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, 1968), 34-83. See also James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of*

central and powerful role played by the slaveholding South in the formation and development of American politics and nationalism between the Revolution and the Civil War.¹⁰ And rather than viewing nineteenth-century American nationalism as a unitary and fixed entity, historians are now more likely to approach it as an evolving and contested process. During the antebellum era as in every other era, American nationalism was malleable, and this enabled white southerners to try to mold it according to their own purposes.¹¹ Finally, scholars are beginning to see Americanness and southernness as not only evolving entities but also interrelated ones. Peter S. Onuf has demonstrated that regionalism did not so much follow and threaten nationalism as develop alongside it—indeed, in some respects was present before it. And David L. Carlton has incisively argued that “the construction of the South as an idea has been intimately related to the reconstruction of the American idea over time.” Southernness and Americanness have been intertwined and evolving identities, not mutually exclusive and fixed opposites. Recognition of this casts the white South’s encounter with the Fourth of July in a new light: as one aspect of a broad effort to reconcile evolving conceptions of southern identity with the loose framework of American nationalism.¹²

The Fourth of July had quickly become an occasion to define and negotiate the meanings of American national identity. The anniversary

Southern Identity (New York, 2005); C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston, 1971); Larry J. Griffin, “Southern Distinctiveness, Yet Again, or, Why America Still Needs the South,” *Southern Cultures*, 6 (Fall 2000), 47–72; and Charles Grier Sellers Jr., ed., *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill, 1960). Joseph A. Conforti has reconstructed the nineteenth-century conflation of New England with America in Noah Webster’s and Samuel Morse’s creation of what Conforti terms “national regionalism”: Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 9.

¹⁰ On the power of the slaveholding South in national politics, see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery* (New York, 2001); and Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge, 2000). Two recent studies have emphasized the importance of white southerners to antebellum American nationalism, and vice versa: Robert E. Bonner, “Americans Apart: Nationality in the Slaveholding South” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1998); and Quigley, “Patchwork Nation.”

¹¹ For American nationalism as a process, often a contentious one, see Peter J. Parish, “An Exception to Most of the Rules: What Made American Nationalism Different in the Mid-Nineteenth Century?” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives*, 27 (Fall 1995), 218–29; Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, Kans., 2000), esp. chap. 1; and David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

¹² Edward L. Ayers et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore, 1996), esp. Peter S. Onuf, “Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism,” 11–37; David L. Carlton, “How American Is the American South?” in Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle, eds., *The South as an American Problem* (Athens, Ga., 1995), 33–56 (quotation on 45).

of Congress's adoption of the Declaration of Independence was marked in some cities as early as 1777, and throughout the Revolutionary War the Fourth served as an opportunity to proclaim allegiance to the Patriot cause. By the 1790s, Federalists and Republicans were using the Fourth for partisan wrangling, each attempting to control the national holiday in order to define themselves as the genuinely national party. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Independence Day settled into a less overtly partisan occasion. Celebrations took standardized forms: the ringing of bells and the firing of salutes; the closing of businesses and stores; the mustering and parading of volunteer militia companies; meetings of various voluntary associations; prayer and speeches; the reading aloud of the Declaration; and the consumption of food and alcohol.¹³

In their very uniformity, these rituals constituted important elements of early American nationalism, in the South as well as the North. This was the day of the year when, according to numerous reports, the American people were supposed to forget their differences and come together in a unified celebration of their great nation. Many antebellum commentators emphasized what we might think of as the simultaneity of American nationalism on the Fourth of July: the fact that people in all parts of the country, from all walks of life, assembled in small groups and communities to enact their shared national identity, in the full consciousness that they were symbolically sharing the experience with countless compatriots, even though they could not personally observe them. As Benedict Anderson has observed, this concept of simultaneity has been a critical element of modern, mass nationalisms in general.¹⁴ And it was everywhere evident on the Fourth of July. In holiday activities across the country, Americans rejoiced at the apparently fantastic nation they lived in, pointing to its impressive material resources, the wonderful progress it had made in the first decades of its existence, and the glorious future it could look forward to. Much of

¹³ On the early history of the Fourth, see Diana Karter Appelbaum, *The Glorious Fourth: An American Holiday, an American History* (New York, 1989); Robert Pettus Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee: One Hundred Years of the Fourth of July, 1776-1876" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1967); Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2002), 13-80; Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass., 1997); Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 8, 34-35, 68-69, 99-102; and both parts of Green, "Listen to the Eagle Scream." Overindulgence was sometimes a problem. An 1848 advertisement for Wright's Indian Vegetable Pills, headlined "FOURTH OF JULY," warned of the possible digestive consequences of going too far "[o]n this day of festivity and joy, when all are prone to indulge in the good things of life." Vicksburg (Miss.) *Tri-Weekly Whig*, July 1, 1848.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed.; London, 1991), 22-36.

this appeared ascribable to the political ideals that America purportedly stood for, especially the great truth inaugurated by the American Revolution: the principle of self-government. Commitment to this great truth lay at the center of Independence Day.

The Fourth was about more, however, than shared political principles. Americans convened on that day to celebrate the sacrifices of the Revolutionary generation, the commemoration of which was recognized as a powerful and sometimes spiritual bond of nationalism. Adulation of Revolutionary sacrifices was a staple of newspaper editorials, speeches, and after-dinner toasts on the Fourth each year. One typical toast, given at an 1851 Independence Day celebration near Richmond, was dedicated to the Union: "The tears of patriots—the blood of martyrs, the trophies of war and the blessing of peace—our common glories and common sacrifices—all render it thrice sacred and hallowed." As the toast indicated, antebellum southerners recognized the primal, emotional power that tears, blood, sacrifice, and martyrdom could lend to American nationalism. This was the same kind of primal, emotional power that themes of death, sacrifice, and the promise of immortality lent to Christianity.¹⁵

Independence Day celebrations reflected the religious style of American nationalism in general. Like many modern nationalisms, it gained appeal through its formal imitation of several key elements of Christian religion, including legendary heroes, ritualized holidays, and sacred documents. Indeed throughout the nineteenth-century world, according to historian John R. Gillis, nations were celebrating their pasts in religious terms; "nations came to worship themselves through their pasts," he says, "ritualizing and commemorating to the point that their sacred sites and times became the secular equivalent of shrines and holy days."¹⁶ Just as Christians use the Sabbath and other holidays as occasions to perform important rituals and to rededicate themselves to the holy cause, so too did antebellum Americans use the Fourth of

¹⁵ "Fourth of July in Richmond," *Richmond Enquirer*, July 8, 1851. On the emotional power of the commemoration of blood sacrifice, see Lloyd Kramer, *Nationalism: Political Cultures in Europe and America, 1775–1865* (New York, 1998); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens, Ga., 1980); and George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990).

¹⁶ John R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in Gillis, ed., *Commemorations*, 3–24 (quotations on 19). Key works on religion and nationalism include Carlton J. H. Hayes, "Nationalism as a Religion," in Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York, 1926), 93–125; and Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford, Eng., 2003). For a valuable overview, see Kramer, *Nationalism*, 62–83. On American nationalism as a "civil religion," see Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York, 2006); and Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation Into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 232–45.

July, the principal national holiday, to uphold their nationalism and ritually to rededicate themselves to the cause of the nation. Indeed, the Fourth was often called the "National Sabbath." One newspaper editor in Tennessee, writing in 1850, asked, "Who does not rejoice that we have a day in which as American Citizens, we can meet each other, and renew our patriotic devotion by the recitation of the pledges of the life, estate and sacred honor, of those who made this day immortal[?]" He went on to draw the religion-nationalism comparison more explicitly: "To the christian, the Sabbath is a day peculiarly adapted to devotion—so this day serves to chasten and to purify the patriotism of the Nation." Other newspaper editors, and other public figures, encouraged Americans to celebrate the Fourth as a patriotic duty, just as the clergy might promote proper celebration of the Sabbath.¹⁷

The reading of the Declaration, whether in public or private, was analogous to Christians' reading from the Bible. A Mississippi editor made this clear in July 1854, informing his readers that it was "as strictly the duty of every citizen of this Republic, who enjoys civil and religious freedom, to read over this noble Declaration, upon this Sabbath of Liberty . . . as it is the duty of Christ[ia]ns to read a portion of the Old and New Testament upon the Christ[ia]n Sabbath." Celebrating the Fourth and rereading the Declaration were important means of enacting one's membership in the nation.¹⁸

Contemporary accounts typically portrayed the Fourth as the expression of a fixed and consensual nationalism—a day when Americans came together in shared and often spiritual commitment to the sacrifices and principles of the American Revolution. Yet beneath this consensus lay deep currents of contention. While most antebellum Americans may have agreed that the Fourth ought to be celebrated, there were fundamental disagreements about what such celebrations ought to mean. More than simply a fixed monument to a past event with an unchanging meaning, Independence Day was an arena in which different groups advanced different interpretations of the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and American nationalism in general.¹⁹

The holiday's tendency toward contention derived from the way antebellum Americans conceptualized its proper purpose. They frequently

¹⁷"The Fourth of July," *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, and Independent Journal*, July 6, 1850. For the phrase "National Sabbath," see *Vicksburg Weekly Whig*, July 10, 1850; and "Fourth Day of July," *Richmond Whig*, July 4, 1850.

¹⁸"The Declaration of Independence," *Vicksburg Weekly Whig*, July 12, 1854.

¹⁹For earlier Independence Day celebrations as contentious events, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 99–102, 129, 219–29, 236–39, 297, 350; and Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 6–7, 83–88, 168–69.

saw Independence Day as a valuable opportunity not just to reflect on the past but also to apply historical lessons to the present. Like Americans everywhere, white southerners liked to ask—often with some anxiety—how well they themselves were living up to the Revolutionary generation's example. Thus one Georgian Fourth of July speaker in 1856 began his speech by observing that in addition to recollecting the history of the Revolution, Americans should "not neglect the more important duty, of surveying the ground over which we have already passed, and determining how far we have departed from our original course." Orators on the Fourth felt a keen responsibility to consider the present condition of the republic and evaluate the dangers it confronted.²⁰

When those orators happened to be ministers, Fourth of July speeches often took the form of jeremiads, proclaiming the importance of maintaining Americans' morals amid the constant danger of declension. Even as the proof of America's material progress was evident all around, ministers urged their listeners to attend to moral and spiritual progress as well. After all, ministers warned, the fate of nations was determined by an all-seeing Providence, and even though America so far appeared to enjoy the favored position of God's country, the moral fiber of both individual and national character was so fragile as to necessitate constant vigilance. For this reason, in 1848 the Reverend E. W. Caruthers told a North Carolina audience on the Fourth of July that Americans should make sure that they spent their national holiday in appropriate fashion. Rather than "revelry and mirth, dissipation and vice," Caruthers thought it best to devote the Fourth to morally improving causes such as temperance, the Sunday School movement, and the colonization of African Americans. Many other Americans viewed the day as an appropriate forum for advancing one's pet cause by imbuing it with the language of patriotism.²¹

²⁰ Anthony McCulloh, *An Oration Delivered before the Oglethorpe Light Infantry, at Woodhome Near Savannah, by Private Anthony McCulloh, July 4th, 1856* (Savannah, Ga., 1856), 5. See also William Porcher Miles, *Oration Delivered before the Fourth of July Association, by Wm. Porcher Miles, on the Fourth of July, 1849* (Charleston, S.C., 1849); [William Gilmore Simms], "Oration, Delivered before the Fourth of July Association; by Wm. Porcher Miles, on the 4th of July," in "Critical Notices," *Southern Quarterly Review*, 16 (October 1849), 257–58; Charles A. Dunwoody, *Address of Charles A. Dunwoody, before the Citizens of Roswell and the Roswell Guards, July 4, A.D. 1860* (Marietta, Ga., 1860); "Independence Day," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 4, 1860; Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 229–50; and Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978), 49–51. Independence Day thus functioned in a way similar to Nazi Germany's commemorations of the 1923 Putsch: according to Paul Connerton, "Its story was told not unequivocally in the past tense but in the tense of a meta-physical present." Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 43.

²¹ E. W. Caruthers, *A Discourse Delivered at Alamance Academy, July 4th, 1848* (Greensborough, N.C., 1848), 26; William Sparrow, *The Nation's Privileges, and Their Preservation: A Sermon*

In the antebellum United States, then, the Fourth of July was an occasion for the definition and redefinition of American nationalism. Much was shared: the revelry, the pageantry, the commemoration of a sacred past. But consensus on the specific meaning of the Fourth in the present—on the question of precisely how the legacy of the Revolution ought to shape antebellum America—proved more elusive. And so, as slavery and sectionalism threatened national unity in the late 1840s and 1850s, it was only natural that Americans should see the Fourth of July as an appropriate day to reflect on these issues and to debate what lessons could be learned from the Revolutionary past.

In certain quarters of the North, the Fourth of July had long been used as an antislavery platform. Given that the holiday was meant to commemorate the Declaration, and given the potentially radical message of equality contained in that document, it is hardly surprising that as early as the 1790s abolitionists held Independence Day meetings that highlighted the inconsistency between the apparent meaning of the holiday and the continued existence of slavery in the United States. When northerners eradicated the institution in their own states, they often chose the symbolically meaningful fourth day of July as the date on which gradual emancipation laws would take effect. In the 1820s the American Colonization Society used the day to advocate the emancipation and deportation of American slaves. And as the antebellum era progressed, abolitionists white and black frequently saw the Fourth as an excellent opportunity to make their case.²²

Many opponents of slavery viewed mainstream Independence Day celebrations with considerable suspicion. An antislavery poem published in 1843 bemoaned the “mockery” and “shame” caused by the fact that America “boasts of LIBERTY” even as “[t]hree millions of her people” were enslaved on “Independence day.” In his justly renowned 1852 Independence Day address, Frederick Douglass posed the biting question, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” and he made it clear to his white audience that they—and not African Americans—were the ones who benefited from the Revolution’s fruits. “This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*,” he stressed. “*You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn.” The historian Mitch Kachun has confirmed this gulf between white and

Preached on the Day of Our National Anniversary, 1852, in Christ Church, Alexandria, Va. (Philadelphia, 1852); Charles M. Taggart, *The Moral Mission of Our Country: Two Discourses Delivered before the Unitarian Christians, of Charleston, S.C. on Sunday, July 3d, 1853* (Charleston, S.C., 1853); William L. Clark Jr., *Importance of Integrity of National Character: An Oration, Delivered by Invitation of the Citizens of Winchester, Virginia, in the Old Lutheran Church, July 4, 1853* (Winchester, Va., 1853); Hay, “Freedom’s Jubilee,” 126–46.

²²Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 22–23.

black Americans, noting that even free African Americans were never included as "true members of the national family" on the nation's birthday. Because of this, some northern African Americans preferred to celebrate on July 5 or August 1 (the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies) instead of July 4. But even so, abolitionists continued to use Independence Day as a symbolically powerful opportunity to expose American duplicity. Thus in 1854 William Lloyd Garrison chose the fourth day of July to burn publicly copies of the U.S. Constitution and the recently passed Kansas-Nebraska Act. Harriet Tubman thought the same point might be made even clearer when, later in the decade, she suggested to John Brown that his raid might appropriately begin on the Fourth of July. In all these ways antislavery advocates called America to account for the inconsistency between its Revolutionary ideals and the practice of slavery.²³

Small wonder that by 1856 one North Carolina editor blamed declining southern interest in celebrating the Fourth on that "wild torrent of fanaticism" in the North that seemed to make Independence Day the occasion more for vilifying the slaveholding South than anything else. Southern newspaper readers had long been led toward such a conclusion. In July 1851, for example, the Richmond *Enquirer* reported on an abolitionist minister in Massachusetts who purportedly thought that "[t]he 4th of July is the most cursed day in all the calendar," a day when "we should clothe ourselves in sackcloth, and sit in ashes."²⁴ Though the *Enquirer* did not say so explicitly, we can safely assume that the abolitionist minister had been attempting to illustrate the hypocrisy of the lack of freedom in America on the day that was supposed to be "Freedom's Birthday." And that point, we can also assume, was not received with much appreciation by the slaveholding South.

If Independence Day was used as a weapon by antislavery northerners, so too was it used by white southern secessionists engaged in resisting abolitionism. To the secessionists, the Fourth of July seemed to offer a perfect opportunity to expose the North's failure to live up to the Revolution's ideals and to contrast that failure with the South's

²³ *Ibid.*, 21–30 (poem quoted on 23–24); Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in Douglass, *Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York, 1994), 431–35 (quotation on 431); Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* (Boston, 2003), 23; Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York, 2004), 166; Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 127–35; Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), 198. For extensive commentary on Douglass's speech, see James A. Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (New York, 2006).

²⁴ Green, "Listen to the Eagle Scream," Part I, 319 (first quotation); "Concentrated Essence of Abolitionism," Richmond *Enquirer*, July 15, 1851 (second and third quotations).

faithful conservation of the spirit of '76. This was a long-standing tactic. During the nullification crisis of the early 1830s, opposing sides in the dispute had carried on separate Independence Day celebrations in Charleston, and the '76 Association, whose 1861 deliberations we have already observed, had been founded in 1833 as a vehicle for lingering nullification sentiment. Separatists continued to align their cause with the memory of the American Revolution. In an 1844 Fourth of July oration, the South Carolina writer William Gilmore Simms took note of the developing sectional conflict over slavery and warned that "[t]he same sense of mental independence which prompted our ancestors to enter the field in 1776, with the British oppressor," meant that the people of the South would not tolerate northern injustices much longer.²⁵

By midcentury, this was a well-honed argument. Secessionists used the Fourth of July and other occasions of Revolutionary remembrance to draw parallels between their own struggle against the federal government's oppression and the colonists' struggle against British tyranny. During the first secession crisis of 1850 and 1851, Independence Day toasts and speeches often compared the secession desired by southerners to the secession that had been carried out by the colonists. Addressing an 1851 Independence Day audience, former South Carolina governor John P. Richardson Jr., who played a central role in the separate state secession movement, issued a firm call to action. The oppression inflicted by the northern-controlled federal government had reached a point at which the South *had* to act. Fortunately, Richardson pointed out, the Revolutionary generation provided a valuable example of standing up courageously for one's principles—an example that he thought should be replicated with his state's secession. David F. Jamison, a secessionist planter who would later preside over the South Carolina secession convention, agreed that southerners should follow their ancestors' example, warning of the consequences of not doing so: "If the people of the South shall submit to a worse than colonial subjection to the States of the North, that revolution will have been achieved for them in vain. All celebrations of the day of Independence will then be over with us." In other words, only by standing up for their rights—even if it meant secession—could white southerners preserve the true spirit of the Fourth of July and the American Revolution.²⁶

²⁵ "Journal of the Whig Association"; William Gilmore Simms, *The Sources of American Independence: An Oration, on the Sixty-Ninth Anniversary of American Independence, Delivered at Aiken, South-Carolina, before the Town Council and Citizens Thereof* (Aiken, S.C., 1844), 25.

²⁶ John P. Richardson Jr., *Oration, Delivered in Clarendon, on the Fourth of July, 1851* (Columbia, S.C., 1851); [David F. Jamison], "The National Anniversary," *Southern Quarterly*

The comparisons that southern supporters of slavery drew between themselves and the Revolutionary generation have surprised subsequent commentators. How could a secession movement based on the defense of slavery position itself as the heir of a revolution apparently founded on freedom?²⁷ (How, too, could certain slaveholders allow their chattel slaves to take Independence Day as a holiday?²⁸) Part of the answer lies in the way generations of Americans either separated white freedom from black slavery in different intellectual compartments or imagined the former to rest upon the latter.²⁹ But the answer also lies in the particular ways that southerners remembered the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, as well as the particular ways that they applied the lessons of the past to the present. White southerners were especially likely, for instance, to emphasize the Constitution—a proslavery document, as William W. Holden informed a North Carolina audience in 1856 and as historian Don E. Fehrenbacher has recently confirmed—as the outcome of the Revolution.³⁰ Even the Declaration, though, could be used to support the slave South, so as long as it was used in the right way. Because the extent to which the American Revolution stood for freedom and equality has always been open to interpretation, southern secessionists could emphasize those aspects of the Revolution that suited their needs and overlook those that did not.

Foremost in the latter category was the apparent assertion of universal human rights contained in the Declaration's second paragraph: the "truths" "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . ." Though these phrases have symbolized the meaning of the Declaration and the Revolution for many Americans, this was not the case for proslavery southerners.

Review, new ser., 2 (September 1850), 170–91 (quotation on 190–91); William Henry Trescott, *Oration Delivered before the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery, on July 4th, 1850* (Charleston, S.C., 1850); Thomas M. Hanckel, *Government, and the Right of Revolution: An Oration, Delivered before the '76 Association, and Cincinnati Society, on Monday, July 4th, 1859, by Thos. M. Hanckel, Esq., a Member of the '76 Association* (Charleston, S.C., 1859); Huff, "Eagle and the Vulture"; James, "Transformation of the Fourth of July in South Carolina," 26–43.

²⁷ Manisha Sinha, for example, has portrayed South Carolina secessionists as American counterrevolutionaries: Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

²⁸ Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 85–86.

²⁹ See Edmund S. Morgan's classic *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

³⁰ William W. Holden, *Oration Delivered in the City of Raleigh, North-Carolina, July 4th, 1856. By William W. Holden, Esq., of Raleigh* (Raleigh, N.C., 1856), 8–9. As Don E. Fehrenbacher argues, the authors of the Constitution may have attempted to maintain neutrality on the question of slavery, but subsequent generations transformed it into a mostly proslavery document. Fehrenbacher, *Slaveholding Republic*.

Their American Revolution did not offer the promise of equality for all. To their minds, most rights were absolutely alienable. Edmund Ruffin, for instance, thought that "the indefensible passage in the Declaration of Independence" was "both false & foolish." The eccentric Virginian George Fitzhugh was more specific in his critique: "We agree with Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson, that all men have natural and inalienable rights We conclude that about nineteen out of every twenty individuals have 'a natural and inalienable right' to be taken care of and protected, to have guardians, trustees, husbands, or masters." The other one in every twenty people, according to Fitzhugh's reinterpretation of the Declaration's preamble, had the right to rule over the rest and enjoy true liberty.³¹

As with any document, the Declaration's significance has generated differing interpretations. Recent work on the international impact of the Declaration indicates that the document's meaning has changed according to context; people have read it with their own agendas and requirements in mind. Thus the human rights component was, unsurprisingly, minimized in late-eighteenth-century Russia and Poland. More generally, David Armitage has persuasively argued that people across the world tended to see the Declaration as being a model for the assertion of the sovereignty of independent states much more than a document of equal rights.³² Even within the United States, the reputation of the Declaration has fluctuated. Little cherished by late-eighteenth-century Americans, the Declaration, as the historian Pauline Maier has demonstrated, only began to achieve the status of "American Scripture" in the late 1810s and 1820s. Furthermore, the specific meaning of the document was also in flux in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. Initially, the Declaration's principal significance came from its enumeration of charges against King George III. Gradually, however,

³¹ Entries for July 20, 1857, and October 20, 1858, in William Kauffman Scarborough, ed., *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin* (3 vols.; Baton Rouge, 1972–1989), I, 90 (first and second quotations), 237–38; George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All; Or, Slaves Without Masters*, edited by C. Vann Woodward (1857; new ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 69 (third quotation); George Fitzhugh, "The Declaration of Independence and the Republican Party," *De Bow's Review*, 29 (August 1860), 175–87; Sinha, *Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 226–27, 244; David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 96. For examples of slaveholders arguing that the Declaration's promise of equality excluded slaves, see James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1982), 142–43; and John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*. Vol. I: *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (New York, 1995), 63–64, 206, 216.

³² Armitage, *Declaration of Independence*; "Interpreting the Declaration of Independence by Translation: A Round Table," *Journal of American History*, 85 (March 1999), 1280–460, esp. David Thelen, "Individual Creativity and the Filters of Language and Culture: Interpreting the Declaration of Independence by Translation," 1289–98.

beginning in the 1820s, Americans began to see the real significance of the Declaration not in its indictment of the king but rather in its guiding principle of equality. Only with the rise to power of Abraham Lincoln and his generation of northerners, and with northern victory in the Civil War, would the shift in meaning be fully complete. So during the antebellum and even the Civil War years, the significance of the Declaration, and especially the relative importance of its second paragraph, remained an open question.³³

Lincoln made his own reverence for the Declaration clear on several occasions, perhaps most powerfully in a speech he delivered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia shortly before his inauguration as president. "I have never had a feeling politically," he avowed, "that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." Soon-to-be president Lincoln went on to clarify not just the extent but also the specific character of this document's import. Reflecting on the successes of the United States, he emphasized "not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence."³⁴

The majority of slaveholding white southerners disagreed strenuously with Lincoln's reading of the document and fought a rearguard defense against the growing ascendancy of the second paragraph. In so doing, they took advantage of the flexibility of American nationalism and advanced their own definition of it. Though few rejected the second paragraph as explicitly as did George Fitzhugh, many implicitly denied its centrality to the meaning of the American Revolution. On July 4, 1859, for example, Charlestonian Thomas M. Hanckel portrayed the Revolution as an ideologically conservative act intended primarily to resist repression—"more a separation of States," as he put it, "than a social and political revolution." The contrast with Lincoln's appraisal is striking. The typical Fourth of July oration in the antebellum South stressed the limitations of the freedom won by the Revolution. Addressing

³³ Maier, *American Scripture*, esp. 175–202; Armitage, *Declaration of Independence*, 63–102; Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1978). On both northerners' and southerners' selective use of the memory of the Declaration and its author, see Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 162–89.

³⁴ "Speech in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 22, 1861," in Michael P. Johnson, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Boston, 2001), 107.

an Independence Day audience at the University of Virginia in 1860, D. W. Voorhees argued that the Revolutionary generation "never asserted that all men were created equal in the sense which modern conspirators against the peace of the nation attach to those memorable words." Voorhees was not himself a southerner but instead an Indiana Democrat with states' rights sympathies who would become a leading Copperhead during the Civil War. His politics meshed nicely with his interpretation of the Revolutionary generation, whom he saw as simply withdrawing from an oppressive government and establishing their right to rule themselves. The notion that the Founders had intended to create any kind of universal equality was blatantly false, he thought. Like other southern partisans, Voorhees held up self-government and limited rights—not universal equality—as the real principles of the American Revolution. According to David Armitage, they were by no means alone in doing so; imitators of the Declaration across the world took "the Declaration's opening and closing sentences as their template while overlooking the self-evident truths of the second paragraph."³⁵

Nor, according to secessionists, was the formation of the Union an important part of the Revolution's legacy. Reviewing the significance of the Revolution in a Fourth of July speech, the prosecession South Carolinian Lewis M. Ayer reminded his audience of what it was important to treasure and what it was not: "The great act of [George] Washington in dissolving in blood, the accursed union of government between the American Colonies and Great Britain, should be held up to our admiration and imitation, rather than the wreck and refuse of that government which he established for our use and protection, but which is about to be wrested to our ruin." Here was an interpretation that southern secessionists could use. "The act of Union," Ayer went on, "was but a mere business transaction." In other words, there was no radical ideology and no mysterious American nationalism at work in

³⁵ Hanckel, *Government, and the Right of Revolution*, 25 (first and second quotations); D. W. Voorhees, *The American Citizen: An Address Delivered by Hon. D. W. Voorhees, of Indiana. Before the Literary Societies of the University of Virginia, July 4th, 1860* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1860), 20 (third quotation); Miles, *Oration Delivered before the Fourth of July Association*; Armitage, *Declaration of Independence*, 96, 113 (fourth quotation). On South Carolinian secessionists' selective remembrance of the American Revolution, see Bonner, "Americans Apart," 162–63; and Paul D. H. Quigley, "That History is Truly the Life of Nations": History and Southern Nationalism in Antebellum South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 106 (January 2005), 7–33. For instances of conservative remembrance of national revolutions in other countries, which were similarly deployed for current political purposes, see Benedikt Stuchtey, "Literature, Liberty, and Life of the Nation: British Historiography from Macaulay to Trevelyan," and Ceri Crossley, "History as a Principle of Legitimation in France (1820–48)," both in Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (London, 1999), 30–46, 49–56.

the American Revolution; the fact that the era concluded with a federation of the states was the result of a simple calculation of interests. The lesson of the American Revolution was that humans no longer needed to trust blindly in their government: the essence of the movement was the great truth of self-government, and if a particular government was not working, it ought to be replaced with another. The Revolution's great achievement lay in dismantling rather than building up, after all, and once southerners recognized this reality, "soon would the aspiring shout for a Southern Confederacy wake the welkin with its gladsome note."³⁶

Such radical deployment of Revolutionary remembrance was roundly condemned by the moderate southern majority. The white South did not speak with one voice on the question of Revolutionary memory and the meaning of the Fourth of July. One speaker at an 1851 Independence Day celebration in Mississippi raised the question of whether disunionists "should be any longer protected by the sanctity of the great Political Sabbath of our Freedom," and he clearly intended that the answer should be no. Disunionists should not be permitted to use the Fourth for their cause. Yet that was exactly what was happening in South Carolina, where celebrations of the holiday appeared to have been deviously hijacked by secessionists. Newspapers in other parts of the South complained about the disunionist tone of some Independence Day celebrations and also of June 28th, South Carolina's Palmetto Day holiday, which commemorated the Revolutionary battle of Fort Moultrie. To editors outside South Carolina, it seemed like sacrilege to use the memory of the American Revolution for "an orgie of Disunion." The Fourth, and the Revolution in general, ought to be used to strengthen the bonds of American nationhood, not to tear them apart.³⁷

In this spirit, at midcentury the majority of white southerners continued to hope that the Union could be preserved. This was especially true of those outside South Carolina and even more especially of those with Whig affiliations—a useful reminder that people in different parts of the South with different political party loyalties approached the Fourth

³⁶ Lewis M. Ayer, *Southern Rights and the Cuban Question: An Address Delivered at Whippy Swamp, on the Fourth of July, 1855* (Charleston, S.C., 1855), 3–8 (first and fourth quotations on 8, second and third quotations on 4).

³⁷ "Fourth of July," *Vicksburg Weekly Whig*, July 23, 1851 (first quotation); "Anniversary Celebration in South Carolina," *Richmond Whig*, July 4, 1851; "Fort Moultrie and the Secessionists," *ibid.* (second quotation); "Independence Day in South Carolina," *ibid.*, July 15, 1851; "More Madness," *Richmond Enquirer*, July 4, 1851; "Independence Day," *ibid.*, July 8, 1851; "The Fourth of July in South Carolina," *ibid.*, July 15, 1851; "We Pause for a Reply," *Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer*, July 16, 1850.

of July with different agendas in mind. In 1849 *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, and Independent Journal* expressed approval of the fact that celebrations of the Fourth remained strong, and it urged readers, "in these days of annexation and war, of Wilmot Provisos and threatened Disunion, cling to the glorious arch by which our UNION is sustained, until all *Factions* shall have crumbled under its weight!" Such rhetorical flourish was perhaps unique to the newspaper edited by William "Fighting Parson" Brownlow, the fiery champion of Methodism, Whig politics, and the Union, but the underlying sentiment was shared by many. The following year, the paper again welcomed the holiday as an occasion when all Americans' patriotism should be renewed—a function that seemed ever more urgent as the specter of disunion loomed larger. Other white southerners at midcentury feared that they might be marking the last Independence Day with the Union intact, even as they hoped that that would not in fact be the case.³⁸

Most white southerners' unionism in the late 1840s and 1850s was not, however, without qualification. Many celebrations of the Fourth in those years were marked by an emphatically conditional unionism: the hope that the Union would survive, but only if southerners could feel assured that their rights were secure within it. Addressing a Wilmington, North Carolina, audience on the Fourth of July in 1851, Joshua G. Wright highlighted the serious threat that northern antislavery activism represented to the Union. But in addition to encouraging his fellow southerners to resist that threat with determined action, he finished his speech with the recommendation that even as southerners ought to "stand up for our rights," they should also "turn no deaf ear to the invocations of patriotism, and still maintain our fidelity to the *Compromise*, the *Constitution* and the *Union*." A similar sentiment of conditional unionism was evident at Independence Day celebrations across the South, and many participants, like Wright, held up the Constitution as an aspect of American national identity around which southerners and northerners ought to be able to rally. A militia company in Richmond raised its collective glass in 1850 to several typical toasts: one to the Union proclaimed, "We would join our hearts and hands for its preservation, so long as it is worth preserving"; and another to "Our Country" declared loyalty to the United States and the willingness to

³⁸ "Fourth of July Celebration," *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, and Independent Journal*, July 7, 1849; "The Fourth of July," *ibid.*, July 6, 1850; "Fort Moultrie and the Secessionists," "Anniversary Celebration in South Carolina," "The Union of Our Fathers," and "The Day," all in *Richmond Whig*, July 4, 1851; "To-Day!" *Richmond Enquirer*, July 4, 1850.

sacrifice much in its behalf—but it ended with the qualification, “but it must be *without dishonor*.”³⁹

Each camp in the antebellum sectional conflict thus claimed congruence between its own position and the legacy of the American Revolution. To antislavery northerners, the Fourth of July highlighted the hypocrisy of American slaveholding. To slavery’s defenders, there was no contradiction, since the Fourth ought properly to commemorate a conservative movement for the self-government of white people, not the universal equality of all. And to the moderates in between, the spirit of the Fourth implied a national unity that ought to avoid radicalism on both sides. Ultimately, these competing interpretations of the meaning of the Fourth—the meaning of America—would drive the nation toward civil war.

By the time of the secession crisis of 1860–1861, increasing numbers of white southerners drew on an established intellectual tradition of justifying secessionism by associating it with the memory of the American Revolution. Parallels between the southern and the American independence movements became ever more pervasive. Even the official postsecession address of South Carolina to the other southern states drew the parallel explicitly. “The Southern States,” it announced, “now stand exactly in the same position towards the Northern States that the Colonies did towards Great Britain. . . . [T]he Government of the United States has become a consolidated Government; and the people of the Southern States are compelled to meet the very despotism their fathers threw off in the Revolution of 1776.” And upon the creation of the Confederacy, southerners translated their ideological identification with the Revolutionary generation into iconographical terms. The Confederate Constitution and flag differed little from their United States counterparts; the pictures on Confederate postage stamps and currency were of Washington and Jefferson as well as Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun.⁴⁰

³⁹ Joshua G. Wright, *An Oration Delivered in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Wilmington, N.C., . . . on the Fourth of July, A.D. 1851* (Wilmington, N.C., 1851), 21; “Celebration of the Fourth of July, 1850,” *Richmond Enquirer*, July 9, 1850.

⁴⁰ “The Address of the People of South Carolina, Assembled in Convention, to the People of the Slaveholding States of the United States,” in John Amasa May and Joan Reynolds Faunt, *South Carolina Secedes* (Columbia, S.C., 1960), 83; Rubin, “Seventy-six and Sixty-one”; Rubin, *Shattered Nation*; Mitchell Snay, *The Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (1993; reprint, Chapel Hill, 1997), 196–97; William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (1961; reprint, New York, 1969), chap. 8; David L. Smiley, “Revolutionary Origins of the South’s Constitutional Defenses,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 44 (Summer 1967), 256–69.

It is clear that Confederates were unwilling to leave their American-ness behind. But even so, as the Fourth of July loomed in 1861, it was equally clear that the changed political situation mandated serious reflection on how the holiday ought to be marked below the Mason-Dixon Line. In the wake of secession and the creation of the Confederacy, there were some who felt that Independence Day should expire along with the United States. This is exactly what the Vicksburg *Whig* had predicted as early as 1849, when, faced with the alarming and undesirable prospect of disunion, its editor worried that, if the worst came to pass, the anniversary would be forgotten and the heritage of the Revolution lost. "Beyond the existence of this Union," as the *Whig* put it, "there will be no Fourth of July!" By 1861 one soldier, at least, thought that this would indeed be the case, noting in his diary on July 4 that year, "Once the Sons of the South hailed its coming with joy, but now we heed it not for the United States are no more." And in Charleston, Alfred H. Dunkin, who had been selected by one association as its Fourth of July orator, declined to deliver a speech. "Times have changed," he explained. The present was such a volatile time, with the South fighting for its independence, that he felt it inappropriate to hold forth on "a past Independence." He suggested that they ought instead to have a public speech on December 20, the anniversary of South Carolina's secession, the day "on which was asserted and vindicated the principles of the 4th July, 1776." So even though he claimed to fight for the principles of the original American Revolution, Dunkin felt that southerners ought to be publicly celebrating declarations of South Carolinian, rather than American, independence.⁴¹

It was more often asserted, though, that Confederates had every right—and even a duty—to continue to celebrate the Fourth. As the editor of the *Mobile Advertiser and Register* put it, because the Declaration was a "great State Rights instrument" and its anniversary "belongs to the South as fully as to the North," the Fourth "cannot be dropped from the National calendar of the Confederate States." And a couple of days later the editor in Mobile reprinted an excerpt from a Louisiana

⁴¹ "The Fourth," Vicksburg *Tri-Weekly Whig*, July 7, 1849; G. Ward Hubbs, ed., *Voices from Company D: Diaries by the Greensboro Guards, Fifth Alabama Infantry Regiment, Army of Northern Virginia* (Athens, Ga., 2003), 11; "Fourth of July," Charleston *Daily Courier*, July 6, 1861. Dunkin's words raise an intriguing question: why did southerners not celebrate a new, specifically Confederate independence day? Other than scattered suggestions like this one, I have come across little support for such an endeavor—perhaps because different states seceded from the Union (and joined the Confederacy) on different dates; perhaps because the demands of war proved too distracting; or perhaps because so many white southerners saw the Confederacy as a continuance of the United States, not a departure from it.

newspaper that contained a similar sentiment: "The Yankees have robbed us of too much already. We have no idea of giving up the national anniversary—not a bit of it. The Fourth of July is ours. The Declaration of Independence declared and reiterated the doctrine for which we are to-day fighting. It was drafted by a Southern man and advocated by Washington and a host of other Southern heroes." Many others, in newspapers, speeches, diaries, and letters, agreed that the Confederacy had a strong claim to ownership of the holiday, based on the apparent similarities between 1776 and 1861.⁴²

Accordingly, a newspaper article about St. James Santee, South Carolina, reported, "The Fourth July was celebrated in this Parish with unusual military display and enthusiasm." The after-dinner toasts reflected the new political circumstances and included some that claimed ownership of the Fourth for the new Confederacy: the first toast was in honor of "*The Day we Celebrate*—Sacred to the cause of Constitutional liberty; it is ours by inheritance"; and the third was to "*The Confederate States of America*—True to the spirit of '76." After the toasts, a letter from a local politician who had been invited to the celebration but had been unable to attend was read out. Giving thanks for the invitation, the politician observed that "[f]or some years past" he had been reluctant to celebrate the Fourth, uncertain as to whether it had "really secured our freedom and independence." But now that the old Union was dissolved, he felt able once again to mark the anniversary in good faith, and moreover, he recommended that "it ought to be celebrated with renewed zeal." For this South Carolinian, the Fourth was a holiday even more appropriate for the Confederate States than it had been for the antebellum United States.⁴³

In claiming ownership of the holiday, some white southerners thought that northerners' failure to live up to the legacy of the Revolution meant that they had forfeited their claim to the Fourth. One Confederate soldier complained to his aunt how hypocritical he regarded northern celebrations when he heard from his camp salutes being fired at Washington, D.C., on the morning of July 4, 1861. "What mocking," he thought, that northerners were "celebrating their independence and at the same time striving to deprive their assistants in the strife of the very boon which they estimate so highly." The North, in his judgment, had no right to

⁴² "The Fourth of July," *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, July 2, 1861 (first, second, and third quotations); "The Fourth of July at Shreveport," excerpt from the *Southwestern*, in *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, July 4, 1861 (fourth quotation); Green, "Listen to the Eagle Scream," Part II, 535–36; Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 253–57; Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 57.

⁴³ "St. James' Santee," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 12, 1861.

continue to commemorate a movement whose principles the region had discarded.⁴⁴

In one of the few formal Fourth of July orations to be held below the Mason-Dixon Line in 1861, Alexander Watkins Terrell told his Texas audience that in separating from those northerners, southerners had clearly acted in alignment with the principles of '76. The earlier revolutionaries had provided an invaluable example of courageously standing up for their rights and refusing to allow a dominant power to exercise control over them. And the principle for which that generation fought was not, Terrell took care to point out, universal liberty but rather a very limited conception that the right of self-government was appropriate in their particular situation. In doing so, of course, he built on other southerners' prewar interpretations of Revolutionary memory. In fighting for what he saw as the real ideals of the American Revolution, Terrell declared, Confederates were actually fighting in "the second war for independence." "In view of all the lessons of the past, and the issues of the present," he explained, "we may reassure ourselves with the conviction that we have not departed from the faith bequeathed to us by the men of Seventy-Six. Constitutional liberty[,] expelled from most Governments upon earth, finds now her abiding place among the Confederate States of America, and so long as they are true to the principles that now govern and control them, so long will the fourth day of July be held in grateful remembrance."⁴⁵

Other southerners expressed a similar sense of relief that their own generation seemed to have succeeded in standing up for their rights. The Richmond *Enquirer* gladly (if a little inaccurately) reported "that the 4th of July will be generally observed throughout the Southern Confederacy." The example of the Revolutionary generation had been followed, and the *Enquirer* clearly approved: "Thank Heaven, that thus far at least, the sons have proven worthy of their sires!" In encouraging those sons to continue to follow their fathers' example, the editor of the *Enquirer* referred to the similarities between the secessionist principles of the Declaration of Independence and the principles that actuated the secession of the southern states and the formation of the Confederacy. In the Declaration, he observed, could be found the truths that government existed by consent of the governed and that people had a right,

⁴⁴ Dick Simpson to Caroline Virginia Taliaferro Miller, July 4, 1861, in Guy R. Everson and Edward H. Simpson Jr., eds., "*Far, Far from Home*": *The Wartime Letters of Dick and Tally Simpson, Third South Carolina Volunteers* (New York, 1994), 23.

⁴⁵ Alexander Watkins Terrell, *Oration Delivered on the Fourth Day of July, 1861, at the Capitol, Austin, Texas* (Austin, Tex., 1861), 14 (first quotation), 17 (second and third quotations).

even a duty, to overthrow and replace despotic governments. Since these ideals lay at the heart of the Confederacy's formation, thought the editor, "'Tis meet that the South, which has been ever faithful to free government, should not forget Liberty's first anniversary while founding a second."⁴⁶

Whereas the *Enquirer's* editor stressed the similarity of the two revolutions, others, echoing the prewar writings of Edmund Ruffin and George Fitzhugh, conceded some inconsistencies between the Confederacy's principles and certain aspects of the American Revolution. Contrary to what scholars have often assumed, Revolutionary memory was not claimed indiscriminately. Some commentators did acknowledge the inconsistency between slavery and certain aspects of the Revolutionary heritage. Thus the editor of the *Richmond Examiner* urged his readers in 1861 that they should always remember the Revolution and the Fourth of July. But he also informed them that it was time to consign one element of the holiday—the Declaration's second paragraph—to the dustbin. Why on earth, he wondered, would a group of slaveholders tack a potentially radical statement of equality onto that document? The second paragraph was completely misguided, he concluded; abolitionists had used it as a sort of Trojan horse to destroy the Union from within. Instead of being hypocritical now, southerners should jettison the problematic section of the Declaration and distinguish between the Revolutionaries' actions—which were noble—and their own explanation of those actions—which ought to be ignored. Likewise, the *Charleston Daily Courier*, even as it "reject[ed] utterly the barefaced and transparent fallacies with which the production of MR. JEFFERSON opens," asserted that in seceding the southern states had faithfully acted out another passage of the Declaration: the one concerning the right of a people to resist oppression and to govern themselves. These writers selected those aspects of the Revolutionary heritage that seemed to fit and tossed out those that did not.⁴⁷

Across the South that July, the question of how the Fourth ought to be celebrated—if at all—remained unresolved. Members of Charleston's '76 Association were not the only ones who were ambivalent. One southerner writing from Richmond observed that it was hard to believe it was the Fourth at all. Though he and his peers continued to prize the principles of 1776, it was difficult to celebrate in view of the severity

⁴⁶ "The Fourth of July," *Richmond Enquirer*, July 4, 1861.

⁴⁷ Untitled editorial, *Daily Richmond Examiner*, July 5, 1861; "A Parallel," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 4, 1861.

of the present crisis. "It is a Fourth of July merely in name," he wrote, "suggestive only of mournful contrasts and solemn recollections." Teenaged Louisianan Sarah Lois Wadley was similarly uncertain about what to make of the holiday. In 1861 she recorded in her diary that the Fourth had passed very quietly, her mind having been "so much occupied by other things that I had almost forgotten the day." She read in the papers that the anniversary had been marked by the closing of businesses and stores, by the firing of salutes, and so forth, but nothing too raucous. She was glad about that: "I think that the day should have been observed with unusual strictness, but it is natural and right that the feeling should have been more of sober thankfulness and religious prayer than of noisy joy." The role of American Independence Day in the Confederacy remained undecided.⁴⁸

In 1861, more generally, there was no definitive answer to the problem of how Confederate national identity related to American national identity. White southerners did not, as a general rule, wish to yield American national identity to northerners. On the contrary, many in the South believed that northerners had perverted that national identity and had less of a claim on it than did southerners themselves. But the fact that the institutional embodiments of American nationalism remained in northern hands rendered this argument problematical. It had been the South, and not the North, that had taken its leave of the Union. And so, despite frequent statements that Confederate national identity was a purified replication of American national identity and despite attempts to claim selected aspects of Revolutionary memory for the South alone, the precise relationship between the new and the old was left undetermined.

Most Confederates, of course, were simply too occupied with the war to spend much time debating ownership of the American heritage. But of all the days of the year it was on the Fourth of July that white southerners were most likely to reflect, for a moment at least, on the former United States and the anniversary of its birth. Celebrations were muted, as one would expect during wartime. But in spite of the lack of public festivities, some commentators continued to assert the South's ownership of the Fourth—insisting that the principles commemorated by the anniversary lay at the heart of the Confederacy's bid for independence—while others appeared less certain. The Fourth did keep its

⁴⁸ Letter signed "Personne," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 6, 1861; Sarah Lois Wadley Diary, July 7, 1861, Sarah Lois Wadley Papers #1258 (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

place in at least one Confederate composition textbook. Among subjects such as "Roses," "A Picnic," and "A Sleigh Ride" appeared the "Fourth of July." The textbook asked students to answer questions about the origins and nature of the Fourth and what typically happened on the day, and finally inquired: "Ought not its observance to be perpetuated?"⁴⁹

Kentuckian Confederate officer Edward O. Guerrant would have replied to that question with a resounding yes. On the Fourth of July in 1862, he wrote at some length in his diary about what he called this "once glorious & happy day." Though the Fourth awakened sorrow as well as pride, he resolved to restore its glory: "This day 86 years ago our fathers declared we *would* be free & today we'll prove it or baptize it in our lifeblood." One year later, in 1863, Guerrant again noted the occurrence of what he now termed "Freedom's Birth Day." Again, he stressed the continuity between the American and southern independence movements, identifying the Confederacy as the only "heir" of the Revolution. For the new nation, today was "the anniversary of her mothers birth . . . its memories disgraced by a degenerate offspring"—that was, the North. Guerrant promised to "cling with grateful veneration to its hallowed recollections, & revive its spirit in our patriotic actions!"⁵⁰

The Charleston *Daily Courier* also continued during the war to claim ownership of the holiday for the South. In 1862 the *Courier* noted that the anniversary found southerners engaged in a struggle to implement the correct interpretation of the Revolution in general and the Declaration in particular. Both were beyond a doubt "on the side of the South." The following year, the *Courier* asserted that the Confederacy's struggle for self-government was a "logical supplement" to the earlier revolution, whose significance lay in the achievement of independence, not the unity of the states. To be sure, there would be no parades or formal ceremonies this year, but the *Courier* thought that was a good thing. It was too hot for that kind of celebration, and besides, the war provided plenty of other things to worry about. Going on to separate the activity from the principle, the *Courier* maintained that, despite the lack of

⁴⁹ Levi Branson, *First Book in Composition, Applying the Principles of Grammar to the Art of Composing: Also, Giving Full Directions for Punctuation; Especially Designed for the Use of Southern Schools* (Raleigh, N.C., 1863), 101 (first quotation), 108 (second quotation), 110 (third quotation), 117–18 (fourth and fifth quotations). Perhaps we should not make too much of this: many Confederate textbooks were only very hastily revised versions of United States editions, and it is possible that this Fourth of July section simply slipped beneath the radar. See Rable, *Confederate Republic*, 179–83.

⁵⁰ William C. Davis and Meredith L. Swentor, eds., *Bluegrass Confederate: The Headquarters Diary of Edward O. Guerrant* (Baton Rouge, 1999), 115, 301–2.

organized celebration, "[t]he day is ours in all its essential and permanent lessons and significance, and we intend so to claim and honor it." Another South Carolina newspaper, the *Sumter Watchman*, conceded in 1862 that the Fourth was strongly associated with the now-defunct Union, but the paper nonetheless believed that southerners should continue to prize the day, since "we are now reasserting the principles of '76." "The Fourth of July," the *Watchman* went on, "is our Anniversary, and Yankeedom has no right to desecrate it by pretending to celebrate the memories of a glorious past, and of which they are unworthy."⁵¹

Others agreed that northerners had proved themselves unworthy of the holiday and no longer had any claim to it at all. One southern man writing from Knoxville in 1862 thought back to those days when northerners had celebrated the day alongside southerners and had professed to subscribe to its principles. Surely, he thought, the North recognized the fundamental inconsistency between the ideals of Independence Day and the region's oppression of the South: "Alas! for the Fourth of July to the Northern people." Edmund Ruffin, for whom acerbic criticism of the North was an old habit, was struck by the same thought when he witnessed northerners flying flags and firing salutes on July 4, 1862. "What striking inconsistency—what a farce," he wrote in his diary, that northerners should purport to celebrate the Declaration of Independence, which had established "the *right* of every oppressed people to assert their independence & separate nationality," even while the northern states were engaged in attempting to deny with force the South's right to do that very thing. Northerners had diverged so much from the principles of the Fourth that they had no right to celebrate it at all.⁵²

For others in the South the holiday became an odd, unsettling occurrence. As we have seen, the question of whether to celebrate the Fourth—and if so, how—had been a vexing issue in 1861. And reconciling claims to ownership of the American Revolution, on the one hand, with the fact of having seceded from the Union that the Revolutionary generation created, on the other, continued to raise problems. The *Charleston Mercury* captured this paradox when it reported in 1862 that the Fourth "happens strangely at this momentous juncture." Strangely indeed. As the war progressed, when southerners noted the Fourth at all, it was often to remark on how much the day had changed or to

⁵¹ "Independence Day" (including excerpt from the *Sumter Watchman*), *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 4, 1862; "The Day We Used to Celebrate," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 4, 1863.

⁵² Letter signed "Ora," *Mobile Register*, July 9, 1862; entry for July 4, 1862, in Scarborough, ed., *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, II, 366–67.

reflect with sadness on its occurrence in such calamitous circumstances. One Virginia woman assumed in an 1862 diary entry that "[t]he fourth was not celebrated I don't expect by either side." That same year, soldier James Johnson Kirkpatrick similarly chronicled, "Everything quiet. . . . No one seems to think that today was once an observed anniversary." Nurse Kate Cumming marked Independence Day in both 1862 and 1863 with disconsolate diary entries. In 1862 she thought it notable that whereas in former years the whole nation had celebrated the day together, now "Part of that nation [was] seeking to enslave the other!" One year later Cumming remarked that this once wonderful occasion was now "one of universal sorrow and gloom": "If we could only visit the homes of many North and South, what a picture of desolation would be presented!" In 1864 a Georgia soldier noted that "the memorable day of many years past" was not celebrated, since "the presence of a desolating & destructive war in our hitherto peaceful land, has deprived this day of the gayety [*sic*] & joy heretofore attending its celebration." Many Confederates, presumably distracted by the demands of war, did not remember the Fourth at all.⁵³

For some of those who did, the anniversary became a bittersweet reminder of the principles for which they supposedly were fighting—and perhaps even then losing. Sarah Lois Wadley had forgotten all about the Fourth until she wrote the date, July 4, 1862, in her diary. And in any case, she noted, "we have no time now to celebrate the birthday of a liberty which we had nearly lost and are now struggling so hard to maintain."⁵⁴ Wadley was not the only southern woman uncertain about whether to celebrate the Fourth. Writing to her mother in 1864, one woman wondered how the anniversary would be marked this year. She reported that "Ernest & Charlie have got each a gun and are going to get some powder & shot, but it seem melancoly to me[.] I am afraid our inependance is gone[.]"⁵⁵

The Richmond *Examiner* epitomized the ambivalent feelings with which many white southerners encountered the Fourth during the Civil War. Having encouraged its readers in 1861 to continue to remember

⁵³ Unsigned editorial, Charleston *Mercury*, July 4, 1862; entry for July 4, 1862, in Anita Dwyer Withers Diary #1746-2 (Southern Historical Collection) (second quotation); James Johnson Kirkpatrick Diary, July 4, 1862, in Robert G. Evans, ed., *The 16th Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences* (Jackson, Miss., 2002), 90; Richard Barksdale Harwell, ed., *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse* (Baton Rouge, 1959), 53, 113; Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 260–61 (final two quotations).

⁵⁴ Sarah Lois Wadley Diary, July 4, 1862.

⁵⁵ Ann McCoy to Lois Richardson Davis, July 3, 1864, Lois Richardson Davis Papers, 1851–1915 (Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina).

the Fourth, the following year the newspaper only briefly noted the lack of preparations for the anniversary. But by 1863 the *Examiner* was again faulting the North for abandoning the principles of the Declaration and Constitution, insisting that the Fourth should be celebrated with considerable fervor, since "The glorious day surely belongs to the South." By July 1864 the same newspaper had switched position once again, recounting with approval that the Fourth was "'more honoured in the breach than in the observance.'" The *Examiner* was glad that flag-waving festivities appeared to be a thing of the past in Richmond and that "all such exhibitions of rank liberty run to seed is now of purely Yankee cultivation."⁵⁶

Had it looked to the southwest that Independence Day, the *Examiner* would have discovered a glaring example of just such "rank liberty run to seed." In occupied New Orleans, an assortment of speakers portrayed the Union cause as the cause of 1776. Recalling the American Revolution as a principled struggle for equality, C. W. Hornor consequently saw the Confederacy's firing on Fort Sumter as "the yell of pirates against the Declaration of Independence." Likewise, the Union general Daniel Sickles presented the Civil War as a test of fidelity to the Revolutionary generation. Rejecting southerners' claims that they embodied the true spirit of 1776, Sickles argued that Confederates fought not for liberty but for slavery—two opposing forces that could never be reconciled. There was no doubt as to which force was allied with 1776. In this emphatically pro-Union Independence Day celebration, there was little of the ambivalence that had marked Confederate commemorations throughout the war. The North, the speakers made clear, was fully aligned with the memory of the Declaration and the Revolution in general—particularly the principle of human equality that to their minds lay at its core.⁵⁷

In 1865 Independence Day called forth extensive reflection on how the outcome of the Civil War would affect remembrance of the Revolution. Some white southerners continued to cling to the holiday. The *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, for instance, observed that even though ex-Confederates were too despondent to think about celebrating this year, the South would never lose its claim to the legacy of the Revolution. Southern men would continue to "venerate the memories

⁵⁶ Untitled editorial, *Daily Richmond Examiner*, July 5, 1861; "The Fourth of July," *ibid.*, July 4, 1862; "Fourth of July," *ibid.*, July 4, 1863; "The Fourth of July," *Richmond Examiner*, July 5, 1864.

⁵⁷ *City Celebration of the Anniversary of the National Independence, at Lafayette Square, New Orleans, La., July 4th, 1864* (New Orleans, 1864), 13 (quotation), 16–19.

of their illustrious fathers of '76." But this was a minority stance. The defeated generation of white southerners would largely yield the Fourth to northerners and black southerners. Diarist Mary Chesnut grumpily registered the "Black 4th of July—1865" in her diary—in quiet recognition that it had become a day of jubilation for the African Americans who had been denied access to the promise of the Declaration for so long. A Columbia, South Carolina, newspaper reported that, in contrast to the city's African Americans, "[t]he white people appear to have made no celebration of any kind during the day." And from the same city Emma LeConte wrote in her diary, "The white people shut themselves within doors and the darkies had the day to themselves—they and the Yankees." LeConte was glad that there had been relatively little cannonading: "I could have listened to the roar of cannon at our very doors all day and thought it music were it celebrating *our* independence and—but well, well—what is the use of talking about it." As northerners and black southerners celebrated the triumph of the Union on the Fourth of July, the defeated white South refused to participate.⁵⁸

What was being celebrated that day was the triumph not just of the Union military but also of the interpretation of Independence Day that white southerners had strived to resist. It is not difficult to appreciate how fundamentally the meaning of the holiday was transformed by the sight of former slaves openly celebrating the Fourth. In Augusta, Georgia, that year, thousands of African Americans paraded beneath three banners: one commemorating the martyred Lincoln, another rejoicing over the death of slavery, and the third celebrating the freshly reinvigorated principles of freedom and equality. Much had changed from the way the Fourth had been marked in the antebellum South.⁵⁹

The transformation was by no means restricted to the South. In an 1865 Independence Day address in Illinois, the antislavery lawyer E. C. Larned explained as well as anyone the magnitude of the change. Previously, he said, echoing the denunciations of prewar abolitionists, the Fourth had been a sad day, one that had exposed "the utter falsity of our national life to the national ideas, embodied in the Declaration

⁵⁸ Atlanta *Daily Intelligencer* quoted in Hay, "Freedom's Jubilee," 268; C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, 1981), 832; "The Celebration of the Fourth of July, 1865," Columbia (S.C.) *State*, July 24, 1938, p. 4A (kindly provided by Bruce E. Baker); Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (New York, 1957), 113–14; James, "Transformation of the Fourth of July," 48–50. See also Caroline Howard Gilman to "Eliza," July 17, 1865, Caroline Howard Gilman Papers, 1810–1880, #1036.00 (South Carolina Historical Society).

⁵⁹ James Lynch, *The Mission of the United States Republic: An Oration Delivered by Rev. James Lynch, at the Parade Ground, Augusta, Ga., July 4, 1865* (Augusta, Ga., 1865).

of Independence.” But northern victory in the Civil War had closed that gap. Larned rejoiced that the permanence of the Union and the unity of the American nation had been irrevocably proved. “[T]he grand Providential purpose of this war,” however, did not principally lie in Unionism or in nationality but in the emancipation of America’s slaves. Moreover, he posited a perfect continuity between emancipation and the American Revolution, perhaps especially with the sacred document that Americans assembled to revere every Independence Day. In a phrase that signaled the demise of white southerners’ version of the Fourth of July, Larned held up the Emancipation Proclamation as “the child of the Declaration of Independence.” In the destruction of slavery, rather than in its preservation, could be found the legacy of 1776.⁶⁰

This interpretation took tentative hold in the ensuing years as northerners and black southerners took over the celebration of Independence Day in the face of white resentment. The Emancipation Proclamation was often read alongside the Declaration, symbolically consolidating the antislavery version of the Fourth of July. In 1868 journalists in Richmond described the Fourth as a “prostituted and dishonored national anniversary” that had been “[s]tripped of its former significance and patriotic associations.” And in 1900 the *Atlanta Constitution* observed, “Darktown has a sort of idea that the Fourth of July belongs to it [because] . . . every man, woman, and pickaninny believes the abolition of slavery and the Fourth of July are in some way mixed up.”⁶¹

Despite this complaint, though, black control of the Fourth of July had in fact virtually ended by 1900. Beginning in the 1870s, white southerners began to take back the Fourth of July—sometimes violently—as part of the gradual dismantling of the advances of Reconstruction. Each step along the way represented what the historian Kathleen Ann Clark has labeled “a refashioning of the imagined community of the nation—with southern whites one fractional step closer to inclusion and African Americans just a bit further out.” This trend continued in the following decades as white northerners and white southerners came together around what David W. Blight has described as a fusion of “reconciliationist” and “white supremacist” memories of the Civil War. As white southerners were reintegrated, African Americans were re-excluded.

⁶⁰ E. C. Larned, *The Great Conflict, What Has Been Gained, and What Remains to Be Done: Oration Delivered by E. C. Larned, Esq. at Aurora, on the 4th of July, 1865* (Chicago, 1865), 3 (first quotation), 7 (second quotation), 13 (third quotation).

⁶¹ Hay, “Freedom’s Jubilee,” 273 (first and second quotations); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 55–104 (third quotation on 61).

To be sure, some unreconstructed white southerners continued to refuse to celebrate the Fourth in protest of the outcome of the Civil War. But by the early part of the twentieth century the majority came to embrace Independence Day as a symbol of their readmittance into what was, once again, an emphatically white national community.⁶²

Americans did not, though, completely return to the status quo ante-bellum. On the contrary, the Civil War era saw a fundamental transformation in the way Americans interpreted the Fourth of July and, therefore, in the way they understood American nationalism. White southerners played important yet easily overlooked roles in the course and outcome of this process. Throughout these years they were faced with the problem of how to reconcile their southernness with their Americanness. Even as they were redefining their relationship to the northern states and to the Union, few would willingly sever their relationship with the idea and the ideals of America. Many white southerners insisted that they—not northerners—were the real Americans, the true bearers of the Revolutionary heritage. Yet at the same time white southerners recognized that their relationship with America and the memory of its Revolution was in flux. Confederates had seceded from the Union but wished to claim aspects of its nationalism for themselves. They had separated from the central government formed by the American Revolutionary generation but wished to claim the heritage of that generation, and indeed of Americanism itself, for themselves. This was no easy task, and the problem of continuity versus novelty persisted throughout the war. Too little continuity, and white southerners' enduring attachment to the American past might strain to the breaking point. Too much, and their profession of a distinctive national identity became vulnerable.

These problems were thrown into particularly sharp relief each year on the Fourth of July. White southerners' encounters with Independence Day generated struggles of competing identities—simultaneous and overlapping Americanness and southernness—and, furthermore, with the place of slavery and equality within both. Their responses, as we have seen, tended to be ambivalent and highly selective. Whatever their particular stance on the sectional issue, white southerners, and indeed

⁶² Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 143, 182; Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863–1913* (Chapel Hill, 2005), esp. 112–17 (quotation on 116), 126–29; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 2. As Matthew Dennis has observed, some African Americans have remained ambivalent about Independence Day, perhaps feeling, with the writer William Raspberry, “like a bastard at a family reunion.” Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*, 29.

all Americans, attempted to align it with the legacy of the Revolution, even if that meant glossing over inconsistencies or sidestepping contradictions. That they were able to do so exposes the extent to which American nationalism and Revolutionary memory were malleable resources, open to competing uses and interpretation.

This was a stage—a particularly contentious stage—in the evolution of American nationalism, particularly in the role therein of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. Proslavery white southerners tried, but failed, to relegate that paragraph to the margins of Revolutionary memory. In doing so, in crafting an alternative nationalism, they drew on and in turn helped shape an American nationalism that was fluid and ongoing. Hindsight, though, shaped by southerners' defeat in the Civil War, has made it difficult to appreciate their participation in this process. Their American nationalism, their Declaration, their Fourth of July, was buried on the battlefields of the Civil War. The northern version of American nationalism triumphed, even though the full implications of that version's commitment to equality lay dormant for much of the twentieth century. The white southern version was vanquished. The North became America, the South became its opposite, and slaveholders' version of the Fourth of July was rendered obsolete.

Copyright of Journal of Southern History is the property of Southern Historical Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.